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SUBJECT: BAINIMARAMA MEETS ONE-ON-ONE WITH SOMARE

REF: SUVA 417

CLASSIFIED BY: Leslie V. Rowe, Ambassador, U.S. Embassy Port Moresby, U.S. Department of State.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: On December 5, the second anniversary of the coup in Fiji, Interim Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama met one-on-one with Prime Minister and Grand Chief Michael Somare in Port Moresby. According to Foreign Minister Abal, Somare impressed upon Bainimarama the Pacific Islands Forum position that Fiji should hold elections in March 2009. Bainimarama left in the afternoon en route to Solomon Islands for a similar meeting with Prime Minister Derek Sikua. Bainimarama may be using these meetings to split Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands off from the Forum position on Fiji. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Foreign Minister Sam Abal held a briefing on the December 5 Somare-Bainimarama meeting for members of the diplomatic corps. The High Commissioners from Australia, New Zealand, and Solomon Islands, the French Ambassador, representatives from the EU and the UK, and the Ambassador attended. Abal said that PNG had asked Bainimarama to stop in Port Moresby as he transited back from Brussels. He apologized that he was not present at the Somare meeting since Fiji requested that it be one-on-one. However, he spoke briefly to Somare who left shortly afterwards for Lae. Somare said that he pressed the Forum position - March 2009 elections for Fiji - with Bainimarama. Somare told him that he should be working toward elections and should give the Forum an idea of the timeframe. Bainimarama reportedly apologized to Somare for not attending the August Forum meeting in Niue.

¶3. (C) MCG to Fiji Next Week: Abal said that in addition to urging Bainimarama to move toward elections, Somare also offered PNG assistance in the electoral process. Abal said that the Ministerial Contact Group (MCG) will meet with Bainimarama in Fiji on December 11 at 9:00 AM. The MCG will also reiterate to Bainimarama the Forum's position on elections. Abal has asked to call on Bainimarama on December 10 "to protect his Prime Minister." This will be followed by the Leaders meeting which Prime Minister Somare will host on January 27 in Port Moresby.

¶4. (C) Suspension Not an Idle Threat: The Australian High Commissioner commented that the Forum's stand to suspend Fiji if it does not move toward democracy is not an idle threat. He said that the possibility of suspension is serious and that Fiji could also be suspended from the Commonwealth. He stressed that the Forum leaders, including PM Somare (demonstrated by his offer to host the January meeting) are serious. He asked Abal what he thought the outcome of the MCG meeting might be. Abal repeated that he had not attended Somare's meeting today and could not speculate on next week's meeting. He said that the Ministers would make recommendations to the Forum afterwards. He commented that it is a very short timeframe between the MCG meeting and the January 27 Leaders meeting.

¶5. (C) The Solomon Islands High Commissioner said that he had

sent a message to Honiara saying that Somare had held to the Forum position and urged Prime Minister Sikua to do the same. He commented that it appeared that March elections in Fiji are unlikely and that "it would be an uphill battle for the MCG next week." Abal responded that he views it as "an achievement that Bainimarama allowed the MCG to go to Fiji" next week. The Ambassador asked if Bainimarama's meetings with the PNG and SI Prime Ministers and the MCG meeting might indicate any change in Bainimarama's thinking. Abal said that the meetings represented the "Pacific way" of engaging in constant dialogue. Abal also noted that Bainimarama had met with Louis Michel, the EU Commissioner for Development and Humanitarian Assistance, on November 14 in Brussels. He asked the French Ambassador and EU representative if they had any information on the meeting. They responded that they had not been briefed.

¶6. (C) Abal said that Bainimarama invited Pacific leaders for a reception during September's UNGA to apologize and explain why he had not come to the Forum meeting in Niue. Abal said he told Bainimarama that the Grand Chief was unhappy with him. Bainimarama apologized but Abal told him he should come in person to apologize. He also pushed Bainimarama to allow the MCG to meet in Fiji saying that he could not expect his actions to be viewed as legitimate by the Forum members if he would not allow the meeting. Bainimarama retorted, "If you want legitimacy, wait for the court decisions."

¶7. (C) View from Solomon Islands: After the meeting, the Ambassador spoke to the Solomon Islands High Commissioner. He said that he thought Bainimarama had come to PNG and SI to tell Fiji's side of the story, in the hope that he could split two prominent Prime Ministers off from the Forum position. He sent the message to his Prime Minister to maintain the Forum position with Bainimarama because "divided we fall." He said he saw Bainimarama off at the Port Moresby airport before he left for Honiara and that his attitude was "very military, confident and abrupt."

¶8. (C) Comment: On his stop in Port Moresby Bainimarama appeared to be confident about his position. However, it doesn't appear that he persuaded either PM Somare in PNG or PM Sikua in Solomon Islands as he attempted to explain Fiji's side of the story. It is unclear whether these stops, next week's MCG meeting in Fiji, or the Leaders' January meeting in Port Moresby will have much effect on Bainimarama -- or Fiji's return to democracy -- any time soon. End Comment.

ROWE